

# When You Can't Hide Your Mistakes

*While it's true that we all make mistakes, some mistakes are more public than others. How do you handle those mistakes that everyone knows about?*

*Come close and listen: the answer lies in your relationship to the man from Galilee. It's about forgiveness. . . choices... understanding who you are in God's eyes.*

*Read on and learn what the Savior says about our mistakes.*



## *The Prison of Pride*

As Brazilian jail cells go this one wasn't too bad. There was a fan on the table. The twin beds each had a thin mattress and a pillow. There was a toilet and a sink.

No, it wasn't too bad. But, then again, I didn't have to stay.

Anibal did. He was there to stay.

Even more striking than his name (pronounced "uh-nee-ball") was the man himself. The tattooed anchor on his forearm symbolized his personality—cast-iron. His broad chest stretched his shirt. The slightest movement of his arm bulged his biceps. His face was as leathery in texture as it was in color. His glare could blister a foe. His smile was an explosion of white teeth.

But today the glare was gone and the smile was forced. Anibal wasn't on the street where he was the boss; he was in a jail where he was the prisoner.

He'd killed a man—a "neighborhood punk," as Anibal called him, a restless teenager who sold marijuana to the kids on the street and made a nuisance of himself with his mouth. One night the drug dealer had used his mouth one time too many and Anibal had decided to silence it. He'd left the crowded bar where the two of them had been arguing, gone home, taken a pistol out of a drawer, and walked back to the bar.

Anibal had entered and called the boy's name. The drug dealer had turned around in time to take a bullet in the heart.

Anibal was guilty. Period. His only hope was that the judge would agree that he had done society a favor by getting rid of a neighborhood problem. He would be sentenced within the month.

I came to know Anibal through a Christian friend, Daniel. Anibal had lifted weights at Daniel's gym. Daniel had given Anibal a Bible and had visited him several times. This time Daniel took me with him to tell Anibal about Jesus.

Our study centered on the cross. We talked about guilt. We talked about forgiveness. The eyes of the murderer softened at the thought that the one who knows him best loves him most. His heart was touched as we discussed heaven, a hope that no executioner could take from him.

But as we began to discuss conversion, Anibal's face began to harden. The head that had leaned toward me in interest now straightened in caution. Anibal didn't like my statement that the first step in coming to God is an admission of guilt. He was uneasy with words like "I've been wrong" and "forgive me." Saying "I'm sorry" was out of character for him. He had never backed down before any man, and he wasn't about to do it now—even if the man were God.

In one final effort to pierce his pride, I asked him, "Don't you want to go to heaven?"

"Sure," he grunted.

"Are you ready?"

Earlier he might have boasted yes, but now he'd heard too many verses from the Bible. He knew better.

He stared at the concrete floor for a long time, meditating on the question. For a moment I thought his stony heart was cracking. For a second, it appeared that burly Anibal would for the first time admit his failures.

But I was wrong. The eyes that lifted to meet mine weren't tear-filled; they were angry. They

weren't the eyes of a repentant prodigal; they were the eyes of an angry prisoner.

"All right," he shrugged. "I'll become one of your Christians. But don't expect me to change the way I live."

The conditional answer left my mouth bitter. "You don't draw up the rules," I told him. "It's not a contract that you negotiate before you sign. It's a gift—an undeserved gift! But to receive it, you have to admit that you need it."

"OK." He ran his thick fingers through his hair and stood up. "But don't expect to see me at church on Sundays."

I sighed. How many knocks in the head does a guy need before he'll ask for help?

As I watched Anibal pace back and forth in the tiny cell, I realized that his true prison was not made of bricks and mortar, but of pride. He was twice imprisoned. Once because of murder, and once because of stubbornness. Once by his country, and once by himself.

The prison of pride. For most of us it isn't as blatant as it was with Anibal, but the characteristics are the same. The upper lip is just as stiff. The chin ever protrudes upward, and the heart is just as hard.

A prison of pride is filled with self-made men and women determined to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps even if they land on their rear ends. It doesn't matter what they did or to whom they did it or where they will end up; it only matters that "I did it my way."

You've seen the prisoners. You've seen the alcoholic who won't admit his drinking problem. You've seen the woman who refuses to talk to anyone about her fears. You've seen the businessman who adamantly rejects help, even when his dreams are falling apart.

Perhaps to see such a prisoner all you have to do is look in the mirror.

"*If* we confess our sins, he is faithful and just .. ."<sup>1</sup> The biggest word in Scripture just might be that two-letter one, *if*. For confessing sins—admitting failure—is exactly what prisoners of pride refuse to do.

You know the lingo:

"Well, I may not be perfect, but I'm better than Hitler and certainly kinder than Idi Amin!"

"Me a sinner? Oh, sure, I get rowdy every so often, but I'm a pretty good ol' boy."

"Listen, I'm just as good as the next guy. I pay my taxes. I coach the Little League team. I even make donations to Red Cross. Why, God's probably proud to have somebody like me on his team."

Justification. Rationalization. Comparison. These are the tools of the jailbird. They sound good. They sound familiar. They even sound American. But in the kingdom, they sound hollow.

"Blessed are those who mourn..."

To mourn for your sins is a natural outflow of poverty of spirit. The second beatitude should follow the first. But that's not always the case. Many deny their weakness. Many know they are wrong, yet pretend they are right. As a result, they never taste the exquisite sorrow of repentance.

Of all the paths to joy, this one has to be the strangest. True blessedness, Jesus says, begins with deep sadness.

"Blessed are those who know they are in trouble and have enough sense to admit it."<sup>2</sup>

Joy through mourning? Freedom through surrender? Liberty through confession?

Want a model? Let me introduce you to one.

He was nitroglycerin; if you bumped him the wrong way, he blew up. He made a living with his hands and got in trouble with his mouth. In some ways, he had a lot in common with Anibal. If he had had a tattoo, it would have been a big, black anchor on his forearm. If they had had bumper stickers, his would have read, “I don’t get mad; I get even.”

He was a man among men on the Galilean sea. His family called him Simon, but his master called him “Rocky.” You know him as Peter.

And though he might not have known everything about self-control, he knew one thing about being a fisherman. He knew better than to get caught in a storm...

And this night, Peter knows he is in trouble.

The winds roar down onto the Sea of Galilee like a hawk on a rat. Lightning zigzags across the black sky. The clouds vibrate with thunder. The rain taps, then pops, then slaps against the deck of the boat until everyone aboard is soaked and shaking. Ten-foot waves pick them up and slam them down again with bonejarring force.

These drenched men don’t look like a team of apostles who are only a decade away from changing the world. They don’t look like an army that will march to the ends of the earth and reroute history. They don’t look like a band of pioneers who will soon turn the world upside down. No, they look more like a handful of shivering sailors who are wondering if the next wave they ride will be their last.

And you can be sure of one thing. The one with the widest eyes is the one with the biggest biceps—Peter. He’s seen these storms before. He’s seen the wreckage and bloated bodies float to shore. He knows what the fury of wind and wave can do. And he knows that times like this are not times to make a name for yourself; they’re times to get some help.

That is why, when he sees Jesus walking on the water toward the boat, he is the first to say, “Lord, it’s you. . . tell me to come to you on the water.”<sup>3</sup>

Now, some say this statement is a simple request for verification. Peter, they suggest, wants to prove that the one they see is really Jesus and not just anyone who might be on a stroll across a storm-tossed sea in the middle of the night. (You can’t be too careful, you know.)

So, Peter consults his notes, removes his glasses, clears his throat, and asks a question any good attorney would. “Ahem, Jesus, if you would kindly demonstrate your power and prove your divinity by calling me out on the water with you, I would be most appreciative.”

I don’t buy that. I don’t think Peter is seeking clarification; I think he’s trying to save his neck. He is aware of two facts: He’s going down, and Jesus is staying up. And it doesn’t take him too long to decide where he would rather be.

Perhaps a better interpretation of his request would be, “Jeeeeeeeeesus. If that is you, then get me out of here!”

“Come on” is the invitation.

And Peter doesn’t have to be told twice. It’s not every day that you walk on water through waves that are taller than you are. But when faced with the alternative of sure death or possible life, Peter knows which one he wants.

The first few steps go well. But a few strides out onto the water, and he forgets to look to the

One who got him there in the first place, and down he plunges.

At this point we see the major difference between Anibal and Peter—the difference between a man who hides his problem and one who admits it.

Anibal would be more concerned about his image than about his neck. He would prefer to go under rather than let his friends hear him ask for help. He would rather go down “his way!” than get out “God’s way.”

Peter, on the other hand, knows better than to count the teeth in the mouth of a gift horse. He knows better than to bite the hand that can save him. His response may lack class—it probably wouldn’t get him on the cover of *Gentleman’s Quarterly* or even *Sports Illustrated*—but it gets him out of some deep water:

“Help me!”

And since Peter would rather swallow pride than water, a hand comes through the rain and pulls him up.

The message is clear.

As long as Jesus is one of many options, he is no option. As long as you can carry your burdens alone, you don’t need a burden bearer. As long as your situation brings you no grief, you will receive no comfort. And as long as you can take him or leave him, you might as well leave him, because he won’t be taken halfheartedly.

But when you mourn, when you get to the point of sorrow for your sins, when you admit that you have no other option but to cast all your cares on him, and when there is truly no other name that you can call, then cast all your cares on him, for he is waiting in the midst of the storm.

## *The State of the Heart*

I can still remember the first time I saw one. I had gone to work with my dad—a big thrill for a ten-year-old whose father worked in the oil fields. I sat in the cab of the pickup as tall as I could, stretching to see the endless West Texas plain. The countryside was flat and predictable, boasting nothing taller than pumpjacks and windmills. Maybe that is why the thing seemed so colossal. It stood out on the horizon like a science-fiction city

“What’s that?”

“It’s a refinery,” Dad answered.

A jungle of pipes and tanks and tubes and generators—heaters, pumps, pipes, filters, valves, hoses, conduits, switches, circuits. It looked like a giant Tinker-Toy® set.

The function of that maze of machinery is defined by its name: It refines. Gasoline, oil, chemicals—the refinery takes whatever comes in and purifies it so that it’s ready to go out.

The refinery does for petroleum and other products what your “heart” should do for you. It takes out the bad and utilizes the good. We tend to think of the heart as the seat of emotion.

We speak of “heartthrobs,” “heartaches,” and “broken hearts.”

But when Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart,” he was speaking in a different context. To Jesus’ listeners, the heart was the totality of the inner person—the control tower, the cockpit. The heart was thought of as the seat of the character—the origin of desires, affections, perceptions, thoughts, reasoning, imagination, conscience, intentions, purpose, will, and faith.

Thus a proverb admonished, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.”

To the Hebrew mind, the heart is a freeway cloverleaf where all emotions and prejudices and wisdom converge. It is a switch house that receives freight cars loaded with moods, ideas, emotions, and convictions and puts them on the right track.

And just as a low-grade oil or alloyed gasoline would cause you to question the performance of a refinery, evil acts and impure thoughts cause us to question the condition of our hearts.

But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man “unclean.” For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.<sup>2</sup>

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.<sup>3</sup>

These verses hammer home the same truth: The heart is the center of the spiritual life. If the fruit of a tree is bad, you don’t try to *fix* the fruit; you treat the roots. And if a person’s actions are evil, it’s not enough to change habits; you have to go deeper. You have to go to the heart of the problem, which is the problem of the heart.

That is why the state of the heart is so critical. What’s the state of yours?

When someone barks at you, do you bark back or bite your tongue? That depends on the state of your heart.

When your schedule is too tight or your to-do list too long, do you lose your cool or keep it? That depends on the state of your heart.

When you are offered a morsel of gossip marinated in slander, do you turn it down or pass it on? That depends on the state of your heart.

Do you see the bag lady on the street as a burden on society or as an opportunity for God? That, too, depends on the state of your heart.

The state of your heart dictates whether you harbor a grudge or give grace, seek self-pity or seek Christ, drink human misery or taste God's mercy.

No wonder, then, the wise man begs, "Above all else, guard your heart."

David's prayer should be ours: "Create in me a pure heart, O God."<sup>4</sup>

And Jesus' statement rings true: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Note the order of this beatitude: *first*, purify the heart, *then you* will see God. Clean the refinery and the result will be a pure product.

We usually reverse the order. We try to change the inside by altering the outside.

The message of the beatitude is a clear one: You change your life by changing your heart.

How do you change your heart? Jesus gave the plan on the mountain. Back away from the beatitudes once more and view them in sequence.

The first step is an admission of poverty: "Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . ." God's gladness is not received by those who earn it, but by those who admit they *don't* deserve it. The joy of Sarah, Peter, and Paul came when they surrendered, when they pleaded for a lifeguard instead of a swimming lesson, when they sought a savior instead of a system.

The second step is sorrow: "Blessed are those who mourn. . . ." Joy comes to those who are sincerely sorry for their sin. We discover gladness when we leave the prison of pride and repent of our rebellion.

Sorrow is followed by meekness. The meek are those who are willing to be used by God. Amazed that God would save them, they are just as surprised that God could use them. They are a junior-high-school clarinet section playing with the Boston Pops. They don't tell the maestro how to conduct; they're just thrilled to be part of the concert.

The result of the first three steps? Hunger. Never have you seen anything like what is happening! You admit sin—you get saved. You confess weakness—you receive strength. You say you are sorry—you find forgiveness. It's a zany, unpredictable path full of pleasant encounters. For once in your life you're addicted to something positive—something that gives life instead of draining it. And you want more.

Then comes mercy. The more you receive, the more you give. You find it easier to give grace because you realize you have been given so much. What has been done to you is nothing compared to what you did to God.

For the first time in your life, you have found a permanent joy, a joy that is not dependent upon your whims and actions. It's a joy from God, a joy no one can take away from you.

A sacred delight is placed in your heart.

It is sacred because only God can grant it.

It is a delight because you would never expect it.

And though your heart isn't perfect, it isn't rotten. And though you aren't invincible, at least you're plugged in. And you can bet that he who made you knows just how to purify you—from the inside out.

## *When God Sees You*

When your world touches God's world, the result is a holy moment. When God's high hope kisses your earthly hurt, that moment is holy. That moment might happen on a Sunday during Communion or on a Thursday night at the skating rink. It might occur in a cathedral or in a subway, by a burning bush or by a feed trough. When and where don't matter. "What matters is that holy moments occur. Daily. And I'd like to talk to you about the holiest of those moments—I'd like to talk to you about the holiest moment of your life.

No, not your birth. Not your wedding. Not the birth of a child. I'm talking about *the* holiest moment of your life. Those other moments are special. They sparkle with reverence. But compared to this moment, they are about as holy as a burp.

I'm talking about the sacred hour.

No, not your baptism or your christening. Not your first Communion or your first confession or even your first date. I know those moments are precious and certainly sacrosanct, but I've a different moment in mind.

It happened this morning. Right after you awoke. Right there in your house. Did you miss it? Let me recreate the scene.

The alarm rings. Your wife pokes you or your husband nudges you or your mom or dad shakes you. And you wake up.

You've already hit the sleeper button three times; hit it again and you'll be late. You've already asked for five more minutes. . . five different times; ask again and you'll get water poured on your head.

The hour has come. Daybreak has broken. So, with a groan and a grunt, you throw back the covers and kick a warm foot out into a cold world. It's followed by a reluctant companion.

You lean up and sit on the edge of the bed and stare at the back of your eyelids. You tell them to open, but they object. You pry them apart with your palms and peek into the room.

(The moment isn't holy yet, but it's almost here.)

You stand. At that moment, everything that will hurt during the course of the day hurts. It's as if the little person in your brain that's in charge of pain needs to test the circuits before you make it to the bathroom.

"Back pain?"

"Check."

"Stiff neck?"

"Check."

"High school football knee injury."

"Still hurting."

"Flaky scalp?"

"Still itching."

"Hay fever reaction?"

"Achoo!"

With the grace of a pregnant elephant, you step toward the bathroom. You wish there is some way to turn on the light slowly, but there isn't. So you slap on the spotlight, blink as your eyes adjust, and step up to the bathroom sink.



You are approaching the sacred. You may not know it, but you have just stepped on holy tile. You are in the inner sanctum. The burning bush of your world.

The holiest moment of your life is about to occur. Listen. You'll hear the fluttering of angels' wings signaling their arrival. Trumpets are poised on heaven's lips. A cloud of majesty encircles your bare feet. Heaven's hosts cease all motion as you raise your eyes and...

(Get ready. Here it comes. The holy moment is nigh.)

Cymbals clash. Trumpets echo in sacred halls. Heaven's children race through the universe scattering flower petals. Stars dance. The universe applauds. Trees sway in choreographed adulation. And well they should, for the child of the King has awakened.

Look in the mirror. Behold the holy one. Don't turn away. The image of perfection is looking back at you. The holy moment has arrived.

I know what you are thinking. *You call that "holy"? You call that "perfect"? You don't know what I look like at 6:30 A.M.*

No, but I can guess. Hair matted. Pajamas or nightgown wrinkled. Chunks of sleep stuck in the corners of your eyes. Belly bulging. Dried out lips. Pudgy eyes. Breath that could stain a wall. A face that could scare a dog.

"Anything but holy," you say. "Give me an hour and I'll look holy. Give me some coffee, some makeup. Give me a toothbrush and a hairbrush, and I'll make this body presentable. A little perfume. . . a splash of cologne. Then take me into the Holy of Holies. Then I'll make heaven smile."

Ah, but there's where you're wrong. You see, what makes the morning moment so holy is its honesty. What makes the morning mirror hallowed is that you are seeing exactly who God sees.

And who God loves.

No makeup. No pressed shirts. No power ties. No matching shoes. No layers of images. No status jewelry. Just unkempt honesty.

Just you.

If people love you at 6:30 in the morning, one thing is sure: They love *you*. They don't love your title. They don't love your style. They don't love your accomplishments. They just love you.

"Love," wrote one forgiven soul, "covers over a multitude of sins."<sup>1</sup>

Sounds like God's love.

"He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy," wrote another.<sup>2</sup>

Underline the word *perfect*. Note that the word is not *better*. Not *improving*. Not *on the upswing*. God doesn't improve; he perfects. He doesn't enhance; he completes. What does the perfect person lack?

Now I realize that there's a sense in which we're imperfect. We still err. We still stumble. We still do exactly what we don't want to do. And that part of us is, according to the verse, "being made holy."

But when it comes to our position before God, we're perfect. 'When he sees each of us, he sees one who has been made perfect through the One who is perfect—Jesus Christ.

"All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."<sup>3</sup>

This morning I "put on" clothing to hide the imperfections I'd rather not display. When you see me, fully clothed, you can't see my moles, scars, or bumps. Those are hidden.

'When we choose to be baptized, by lifestyle as much as by symbol, into Christ, the same

shielding occurs. Our sins and faults are lost beneath the sheer radiance of his covering. “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”<sup>4</sup> Please, don’t miss the impact of this verse. ‘When God sees us, he also sees Christ. He sees perfection! Not perfection earned by us, mind you, but perfection paid for by him.

Reflect on these words for a moment: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that *in him* we might become the righteousness of God.”<sup>5</sup>

Now read these words in the Phillips translation: “For God caused Christ, who himself knew nothing of sin, actually to *be* sin for our sakes, so that in Christ we might be made good with the goodness of God.”

Note the last four words: “the goodness of God.” God’s goodness is your goodness. You are absolute perfection. Flawless. Without defects or mistakes. Unsullied. Unrivaled. Unmarred. Peerless. Virgin pure. Undeserved yet unreserved perfection.

No wonder heaven applauds when you wake up. A masterpiece has stirred.

“Shh,” whisper the stars, “look at the wonder of that child.”

“My!” gasp the angels, “what a prodigy God has created.”

So while you groan, eternity gasps with wonder. As you stumble, angels are star struck. What you see in the mirror as morning disaster is, in reality a morning miracle. Holiness in a bathrobe.

Go ahead and get dressed. Go ahead and put on the rings, shave the whiskers, comb the hair, and cover the moles. Do it for yourself. Do it for the sake of your image. Do it to keep your job. Do it for the benefit of those who have to sit beside you. But don’t do it for God.

He has already seen you as you really are. And in his book, you are perfect.

## *His Choice, Your Choice*

Why do I want to do bad?" my daughter asked me, unknowingly posing a question asked by many seekers of truth. "Why do I do the thing I hate? 'What is this ape that gibbers within?' Or, perhaps a more basic question is being asked. "If sin separates me from God, why doesn't God separate me from sin? Why doesn't he remove from me the option to sin?"

To answer that, let's go to the beginning.

Let's go to the Garden and see the seed that both blessed and cursed. Let's see why God gave man . . . the choice.

Behind it all was a choice. A deliberate decision. An informed move. He didn't have to do it. But he chose to. He knew the price. He saw the implications. He was aware of the consequences.

We don't know when he decided to do it. We can't know. Not just because we weren't there. Because time was not there. *When* did not exist. Nor did *tomorrow or yesterday or next time*. For there was no time.

We don't know when he thought about making the choice. But we do know that he made it. He didn't have to do it. He chose to.

He chose to create.

"In the beginning God created . . .

With one decision, history began. Existence became measurable.

Out of nothing came light.

Out of light came day.

Then came sky . . . and earth.

And on this earth? A mighty hand went to work.

Canyons were carved. Oceans were dug. Mountains erupted out of flatlands. Stars were flung. A universe sparkled.

Our sun became just one of millions. Our galaxy became just one of thousands. Planets invisibly tethered to suns roared through space at breakneck speeds. Stars blazed with heat that could melt our planet in seconds.

The hand behind it was mighty. He is mighty.

And with this might, he created. As naturally as a bird sings and a fish swims, he created. Just as an artist can't not paint and a runner can't not run, he couldn't not create. He was the Creator. Through and through, he was the Creator. A tireless dreamer and designer.

From the pallet of the Ageless Artist came inimitable splendors. Before there was a person to see it, his creation was pregnant with wonder. Flowers didn't just grow; they blossomed. Chicks weren't just born; they hatched. Salmon didn't just swim; they leaped.

Mundane found no home in his universe.

He must have loved it. Creators relish creating. I'm sure his commands were delightful! "Hippo, you won't walk . . . you'll waddle!" "Hyena, a bark is too plain. Let me show you how to laugh!" "Look, raccoon, I've made you a mask!" "Come here, giraffe, let's stretch that neck a bit." And on and on he went. Giving the clouds their puff. Giving the oceans their blue. Giving the trees their sway. Giving the frogs their leap and croak. The mighty wed with the creative, and creation was born.

He was mighty. He was creative.

And he was love. Even greater than his might and deeper than his creativity was one all-consuming characteristic: Love.

Water must be wet. A fire must be hot. You can't take the wet out of water and still have water. You can't take the heat out of fire and still have fire.

In the same way, you can't take the love out of this One who lived before time and still have him exist. For he was . . . and is . . . Love.

Probe deep within him. Explore every corner. Search every angle. Love is all you find. Go to the beginning of every decision he has made and you'll find it. Go to the end of every story he has told and you'll see it.

Love.

No bitterness. No evil. No cruelty. Just love. Flawless love. Passionate love. Vast and pure love. He is love.

As a result, an elephant has a trunk with which to drink. A kitten has a mother from which to nurse. A bird has a nest in which to sleep. The same God who was mighty enough to carve out the canyon is tender enough to put hair on the legs of the Matterhorn Fly to keep it warm. The same force that provides symmetry to the planets guides the baby kangaroo to its mother's pouch before the mother knows it is born.

And because of who he was, he did what he did.

He created a paradise. A sinless sanctuary. A haven before fear. A home before there was a human dweller. No time. No death. No hurt. A gift built by God for his ultimate creation. And when he was through, he knew "it was very good."<sup>2</sup>

But it wasn't enough.

His greatest work hadn't been completed. One final masterpiece was needed before he would stop.

Look to the canyons to see the Creator's splendor. Touch the flowers and see his delicacy. Listen to the thunder and hear his power. But gaze on this—the zenith—and witness all three . . . and more.

Imagine with me what may have taken place on that day.

He placed one scoop of clay upon another until a form lay lifeless on the ground.

All of the Garden's inhabitants paused to witness the event. Hawks hovered. Giraffes stretched. Trees bowed. Butterflies paused on petals and watched.

"You will love me, nature," God said. "I made you that way. You will obey me, universe. For you were designed to do so. You will reflect my glory, skies, for that is how you were created. But this one will be like me. This one will be able to choose."

All were silent as the Creator reached into himself and removed something yet unseen. A seed. "It's called 'choice.' The seed of choice."

Creation stood in silence and gazed upon the lifeless form.

An angel spoke, "But what if he . . .

"What if he chooses not to love?" the Creator finished. "Come, I will show you."

Unbound by today, God and the angel walked into the realm of tomorrow.

"There, see the fruit of the seed of choice, both the sweet and the bitter."

The angel gasped at what he saw. Spontaneous love. Voluntary devotion. Chosen tenderness. Never had he seen anything like these. He felt the love of the Adams. He heard the joy of Eve and her daughters. He saw the food and the burdens shared. He absorbed the kindness and marveled at the warmth.

"Heaven has never seen such beauty, my Lord. Truly, this is your greatest creation."

"Ah, but you've only seen the sweet. Now witness the bitter."

A stench enveloped the pair. The angel turned in horror and proclaimed, "What is it?"

The Creator spoke only one word: "Selfishness."

The angel stood speechless as they passed through centuries of repugnance. Never had he seen such filth. Rotten hearts. Ruptured promises. Forgotten loyalties. Children of the creation wandering blindly in lonely labyrinths.

"This is the result of choice?" the angel asked.

"Yes."

"They will forget you?"

"Yes."

"They will reject you?"

"Yes."

"They will never come back?"

"Some will. Most won't."

"What will it take to make them listen?"

The Creator walked on in time, further and further into the future, until he stood by a tree. A tree that would be fashioned into a cradle. Even then he could smell the hay that would surround him.

With another step into the future, he paused before another tree. It stood alone, a stubborn ruler of a bald hill. The trunk was thick, and the wood was strong. Soon it would be cut. Soon it would be trimmed. Soon it would be mounted on the stony brow of another hill. And soon he would be hung on it.

He felt the wood rub against a back he did not yet wear.

"Will you go down there?" the angel asked.

"I will."

"Is there no other way?"

"There is not."

"Wouldn't it be easier to not plant the seed? Wouldn't it be easier to not give the choice?"

"It would," the Creator spoke slowly. "But to remove the choice is to remove the love."

He looked around the hill and foresaw a scene. Three figures hung on three crosses. Arms spread. Heads fallen forward. They moaned with the wind.

Men clad in soldiers' garb sat on the ground near the trio. They played games in the dirt and laughed.

Men clad in religion stood off to one side. They smiled. Arrogant, cocky. They had protected God, they thought, by killing this false one.

Women clad in sorrow huddled at the foot of the hill. Speechless. Faces tear streaked. Eyes downward. One put her arm around another and tried to lead her away. She wouldn't leave. "I will

stay,” she said softly. “I will stay.”

All heaven stood to fight. All nature rose to rescue. All eternity poised to protect. But the Creator gave no command.

“It must be done . . . ,” he said, and withdrew.

But as he stepped back in time, he heard the cry that he would someday scream: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>3</sup> He wrenched at tomorrow’s agony.

The angel spoke again. “It would be less painful . . . .”

The Creator interrupted softly. “But it wouldn’t be love.”

They stepped into the Garden again. The Maker looked earnestly at the clay creation. A monsoon of love swelled up within him. He had died for the creation before he had made him. God’s form bent over the sculptured face and breathed. Dust stirred on the lips of the new one. The chest rose, cracking the red mud. The cheeks fleshened. A finger moved. And an eye opened.

But more incredible than the moving of the flesh was the stirring of the spirit. Those who could see the unseen gasped.

Perhaps it was the wind who said it first. Perhaps what the star saw that moment is what has made it blink ever since. Maybe it was left to an angel to whisper it:

“It looks like . . . it appears so much like . . . it is him!”

The angel wasn’t speaking of the face, the features, or the body. He was looking inside—at the soul.

“It’s eternal!” gasped another.

Within the man, God had placed a divine seed. A seed of his self. The God of might had created earth’s mightiest. The Creator had created, not a creature, but another creator. And the One who had chosen to love had created one who could love in return.

Now it’s our choice.

# Study Guide

## CHAPTER ONE THE PRISON OF PRIDE

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”*

1. After reading these two chapters, complete the sentence: “Blessed are those who mourn for \_\_\_\_\_.” What specific kind of grief do these chapters speak of?
2. Can you think of cases in which admitting failure can become a cop-out—an excuse to stop trying? What (if any) is the difference between “mourning” and giving in to failure?
3. Most of our everyday situations aren’t as dramatic as that of Anibal or Peter; the life-or-death nature of our decisions isn’t as obvious. How can we be more aware of our need for Jesus in noncrisis situations?
4. Read Hosea 7:14 and 2 Corinthians 7:9—11.

What kind of mourning do they describe? Is it included under Jesus’ blessing in the second beatitude?

## CHAPTER TWO THE STATE OF THE HEART

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”*

1. Does the fact that “what comes out of us” makes us good or evil mean that what goes in doesn’t matter much? Why or why not?
2. Look up 1 Kings 18:26—28 and Acts 22:3. Is purity the same as sincerity or good intentions? Can a person be both pure and wrong?
3. Look up 1 Peter 1:22, 1 Timothy 1:5—8, and John 8:31—32. What principles determine purity of heart?
4. Now back up and read Matthew 22:34. What, according to this passage, is the key to achieving purity of heart?
5. Must we always wait until our “insides are clean” before we start to act right—and before we

see God? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER THREE

### WHEN GOD SEES YOU

1. Were you surprised by what the “holy moment” was? Why or why not?
2. As you read this chapter, did you gain a new understanding of the relationship between honesty and holiness, the difference between perfection earned and perfection paid? (See also, Colossians 1:22 and 1 Corinthians 1:8.) Explain your answer.
3. Are you ready to take an honest look in the mirror? If so, what have you been trying to do make yourself more presentable to God?

Read Hebrews 10:14. How has God made you perfect?

What effect does his love and your perfection in his eyes have on the way you feel about yourself? On the way you relate to others? On how you relate to him?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### HIS CHOICE, YOUR CHOICE

- Read Genesis 1:1—26. When was the last time you took time to appreciate God’s creation? Which of God’s creations amaze you? What do they communicate about the character of God? How does it feel to be the creation that made all of God’s creation complete?
2. Why is it so important that God gave Adam and Eve the opportunity to choose? (See Genesis 2:15—17; 3:1—13.) If God hadn’t given us a choice, how would that have influenced our relationship with him? Why is our choice as to whether or not we’ll love God so important?

What were the consequences of Adam’s and Eve’s choice? (See Genesis 3:14—19.)

3. What choice did Jesus make to deal with the sins of all mankind?
4. What choice is the author referring to when he writes, “Now it’s our choice”?



# Notes

## Chapter 1—The Prison of Pride

1. 1 John 1:9, emphasis mine.
2. Bruner states it admirably: “God helps those who cannot help themselves and he helps those who try to help others, but he does not in any beatitude help those who think they can help themselves—an often ungodly and antisocial conception.” *The Christbook*, 152.
3. Matthew 14:28.

## Chapter 2—The State of the Heart

1. Proverbs 4:23.
2. Matthew 15:18—19.
3. Luke 6:45.
4. Psalms 51:10.

## Chapter 3—When God Sees You

1. 1 Peter 4:8.
2. Hebrews 10:14.
3. Galatians 3:27.
4. Colossians 3:3.
5. 2 Corinthians 5:2 1.

## Chapter 4—His Choice, Your Choice

1. Genesis 1:1.
2. Genesis 1:31.
3. Mark 15:34.

When You Can't Hide Your Mistakes

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